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O tradutor e os seus trebelhos: Fred P. Ellison and Translation

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In Joaquim Machado de Assis's novel *Esau e Jacó*, the narrator discusses, in typical self-conscious fashion, a (possible) epigraph for the book, which would serve as "um par de lunetas para que o leitor do livro penetre o que for menos claro" (18), and the relationship between author and characters, which he compares to that between a chess player and his pieces:

> Há proveito em irem as pessoas da minha história colaborando nela, ajudando o autor, por uma lei de idariedade, espécie de troca de serviço entre o enxadrista e os seus trebelhos.
>
> Se aceitas a comparação, distinguirás o rei e a dama, o bispo e o cavalo, sem que o cavalo possa fazer de torre, nem a torre de peão. Há ainda a diferença da cor, branca e preta, mas esta não tira o poder da marcha de cada peça, e afinal umas e outras podem ganhar a partida, e assim vai o mundo. Talvez conviesse pôr aqui, de quando em quando, como nas publicações do jogo, um diagrama das posições belas ou difíceis. Não havendo tabuleiro, é um grande auxílio este processo para acompanhar os lances, mas também pode ser que tenhas visão bastante para reproduzir na memória as situações diversas. Creio que sim. Fora com diagramas! (18–19)

I believe this quote is a fitting springboard, and perhaps even epigraph, for this brief overview of Fred Ellison's work in the field of literary translation, one that, I hope, will serve as a pair of collective spectacles as I attempt to outline his trajectory as a translator—a diagram of sorts, highlighting how his choices in this area of his scholarship fit into a broader, multipronged approach to the study and diffusion of the language, culture, and literature of Brazil in the United States. Hence the (playful) shift from "author" to "translator" in the title of this brief essay, hinting at the idea of translation as part of an overall strategy in which each work functions as a chess piece that contributes to the success of the game—in this case, an overarching scholarly project. As a pleasing, if marginal, additional resonance, I should also note that Fred—or "Fredgee," as many fondly referred to him, pronouncing his name the Brazilian way—was a great admirer of Machado's and regularly taught a popular graduate seminar on his works, where I was first introduced to *Esau e Jacó* sometime in the mid-eighties.

Although translation is getting better press these days than in the past, it is still viewed by many as a derivative and mechanical task anyone can do with the help of "a good dictionary." Few universities in this country have acknowledged it as a legitimate field of study until recently, and the idea that translators must be subservient, dutiful, and stay out of sight remains strongly entrenched in Academia and elsewhere.

Fred Ellison was keenly aware of the value of translation practice as a form of scholarly understanding and of its pivotal role in promoting Luso-Brazilian language and literatures and in building new constituencies for them in an essentially monolingual culture such as the United States. In spite of his trademark blend of self-effacement and Old World courtesy, a form of noblesse oblige that led him to downplay his knowledge and accomplishments and treat everyone, including his students, with genuine respect and as intellectual equals, he was hardly invisible or subordinate as a translator. He not only tackled the multiple demands of translation fully and authoritatively, deploying the aesthetic sensibilities required to recreate a text in another language

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as well as the comprehensive scholarship necessary to introduce it to, and contextualize it for, a new, broader readership; but he also pursued a coherent, more ambitious vision in his selection of texts that became part of a larger translational-critical project.

Among these, Ellison's translations of several authors from the Northeast of Brazil are perhaps the most clearly identifiable offshoot of his critical work. In 1954 he began his examination of Northeastern literature with the publication of his pioneering study, *Brazil's New Novel: Four Northeastern Masters*, an exploration he would continue and broaden over the following years through the translation of works by several *nordestino* authors.

The first of these, the novel *The Three Marias*, published in 1963, and a mainstay of Latin American studies courses ever since, is by Rachel de Queiroz, one of the four masters discussed in the critical study. The book is an example of proto-feminist fiction whose themes, deliberate stylistic simplicity, and insistence on a markedly Brazilian Portuguese register highlight what Ellison described as the "telluric" quality of the novel of the Northeast, one characterized by its social concerns as well as literary value.

Next came *Memories of Lazarus*, by Adonias Filho, published in 1969, a novel whose technical experimentation reinvigorated Brazilian literature and doubtlessly presented its translator with many fresh challenges—Ellison's introduction to the book mentions the musical quality of Adonias Filho's innovative literary style and notes that both the original and the translation are meant to be read aloud.

Osman Lins's novella *Easter Sunday*, co-translated with Ana Luiza Andrade, first published in 1982, and revised and prefaced years later for the 2009 second edition, effectively concludes Ellison's "Northeastern cycle." Among the major and most innovative writers in twentieth-century Brazilian literature, Lins is noted for his exacting, often idiosyncratic style, and is sometimes mentioned along with Adonias Filho as a representative of the psycho-mythological undercurrent in the fiction of the Northeast of Brazil, even though he eventually moved away from more overt forms of regionalism to forge his own path.

Other threads in Ellison's production as translator tend to circle around some of the same thematic and stylistic clusters noted above. Among these alternate routes figures Helena Parente Cunha's *Woman between Mirrors*, translated with Naomi Lindstrom in 1989, a novel whose defining characteristics bring to mind the leitmotivs of some of Ellison's previous forays in the field of translation: a feminist theme, innovative language and literary techniques, and elements from the Afro-Brazilian heritage of Salvador, a city situated in the southern portion of the Nordeste region.

Contrary to previous translations, and in addition to the customary contextualization and critical analysis of the work, the introduction to this book also includes a section devoted to the translators' approach to recreating Parente Cunha's distinctive narrative voice in English. The discussion, complete with several examples, revolves primarily around issues of style and register while implicitly touching on familiar neuralgic points of translation such as fidelity, literalness, and domestication versus foreignization. While eschewing theoretical discussions and jargon, the translators unequivocally define their strategy as one that prioritizes the target language and its natural flow over the source language, and fidelity to the spirit rather than the letter:

> A reader of both the original Portuguese and our version will recognize that the English tends more toward the colloquial register of speech and, at certain junctures, is less elliptical in construction than the Portuguese, among other adaptations. Our earliest drafts featured a more literal and direct equivalence between original and translation. . . .
>
> We deleted and replaced those English utterances that, while literally faithful to the original, were untrue in spirit through their too-notable elevation. . . .

> The search for a more understated form of speech, one less apt to draw attention to its own mechanisms, also led us to expand and make more explicit a number of expressions left cryptically unlinked and discontinuous in the original Portuguese. (ix–x)

Another notable thread in Fred Ellison's corpus of translations are his renderings of Affonso Romano de Sant'Anna's socially-conscious verse. In addition to literature, the two men shared the bonds of a long and deep friendship. Ellison followed with great interest the Brazilian poet's prolific and diverse output, spanning verse, literary criticism, political and social commentary, and non-fiction books on as eclectic topics as art, music and soccer. A lifelong aficionado and practitioner of poetry himself, he held in the highest regard Affonso's poetic art and the courage he demonstrated in defying Brazil's military regime in the sixties, seventies, and eighties with a series of politically charged poems. This admiration resulted in numerous verse translations, most notably "What Kind of Country is This?," published in 1986; an excerpt of "Canto 11" from the long poem "The Great Speech of the Guarani Indian Lost to History and Other Defeats," published in 1987; as well as the recent collection of "little narratives in poetic form" (Sant'Anna 2008: x) titled *A Man and His Shadow*, published in 2008. At the end of his life Fred was still working on the translation of yet another long poem by Affonso that was to be called "The Cathedral of Cologne: a Euro-Brazilian Mosaic," a testament to the enduring quality of the friendship, mutual admiration and collaboration between the two men, as well as to Ellinson's lifelong passion for the art of translation.

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